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Project is as Project Does: Emerging Microactivities and Play Ontology

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to further develop the processual approach in project management theorizing. The article introduces Gadamer's (2004) play ontology as a novel perspective used to describe microactivities in a project environment. Play ontology refers to the back-and-forth movements of seemingly mundane microactivities as they unfold during a project. The findings of the study suggest that sensitivity to the microactivities allows considering dissonant or indecisive events as vital and constructive project elements. Play ontology offers new ways for conceptualizing a project as a process: as something that emerges through practical activities as a dynamic and complex phenomenon.

Keywords

project-as-practice, process ontology, play ontology, vibrant movements, emerging microactivities, construction project

Introduction

Process ontology has found a firm footing in organization studies (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley, Tsoukas, Smallman, & van de Ven, 2013). Recently, projects have also been considered in the context of process thinking, where a project is viewed as a process of *becoming* rather than as a *being*, consisting of stable entities (Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010; Chia, 2013; Karrbom Gustavsson & Hallin, 2015; Linehan & Kavanagh, 2006; Packendorff, Crevani, & Lindgren, 2014; Sergi, 2012; Söderlund, Vaagaasar, & Andersen, 2008; van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2015). Process ontology shifts the focus of research from stability and control to change and fluctuation, putting ongoing action and emergent activity at the forefront of inquiry (Chia, 1997; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016; Rescher, 2012). Blomquist et al. (2017) argue that, while projects are traditionally seen to be constructed as series of pre-planned, step-by-step and controlled phases, the project management literature increasingly recognizes that managing a project involves managing movement and transformation, that is, dealing with human interactions and reacting to changes.

In this article, we study the social interactions during a project and explore how legitimizing these contributes to a worldview according to which a project can be seen as a process. To date, there are a number of studies that consider projects as practices and view projects through the lens of emerging activities (Karrbom Gustavsson & Hallin, 2015; Linehan & Kavanagh, 2006; Packendorff et al., 2014; Sergi, 2012; Söderlund et al., 2008). We build on this view and assert that to understand the fine-grained nature of what happens in and during a project, researchers need to recognize and be sensitive to the ‘vibrant movements’ of the microactivities in the process. We approach this idea from Gadamer’s (2004) play ontology perspective. The metaphor of play refers to an ontological stance that defines a phenomenon—a project—as a *wave* that forms in back-and-forth movements rather than an entity that can be studied as an object.

Our empirical study is about an office renovation project in a university context, which we participated in and studied as a series of unfolding microactivities. The project consisted of re-structuring an existing office space into a design that would serve the work community better than the current design of individual offices, narrow corridors, and a separate coffee space.

The project followed a strong bottom-up approach, with an emphasis on the needs, experiences, and perspectives of the space users. Based on rich empirical data consisting of ethnographic notes, videos of workshops and interviews, we identified how the different views and preferences of the stakeholders engaged in the process emerged and interacted through dialogue. Our findings suggest that in the project, microactivities such as sensing participants' moods during the process and allowing the free emergence of ideas were essential to the process. The findings contribute to the literature on alignment seeking in project management (O'Leary & Williams, 2013; van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2017). We argue that a play ontology approach offers novel insights into the emerging microactivities and their dynamics during the project.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the project-as-practice (P-as-P) literature to the extent that it discusses the emergent microactivities and process ontology. We then extend this by introducing the play ontology perspective to specify how initially separate microactivities can be seen as project-relevant phenomena when accounted for as back-and-forth movements. Second, we introduce the empirical context of the study—a renovation project in a university—and describe the materials used for analysis. The analysis follows a narrative approach involving two rounds. In the first round, we illustrate the project through three vignettes as a continuation of chronological practices. The second round takes a closer look at the microactivities and the way they unfold as back-and forth movements. Finally, we discuss our findings and the contribution of play ontology to better understand the project as a collection of sometimes unforeseen activities.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, we present the theoretical underpinnings informing this study. The aim of the article is to develop a more refined and robust theoretical conception for understanding how projects unfold in practice. While our work is inspired by the project-as-practice approach, we aim to deepen this approach by highlighting the inherent processuality of project-as-practice. Process ontology offers novel ways to describe a project and allows us to bridge the gap that exists between practice- and theory-based theorizing on projects (Sergi, 2012). We contribute to comprehending the processuality in project-as-practice studies by introducing a hermeneutically oriented concept of play ontology that enables the consideration of microactivities as a continuum through which practices are born.

Project-as-Practice and Process Ontology

The project-as-practice approach criticizes the study of best practices in project management as being rather positivistic and functionalistic and failing to recognize real organizational setups that may be messy, ambiguous, fragmented, and political in nature (Cicmil, 2006). Instead, the project-as-process approach emphasizes context dependency and situatedness (Blomquist et al., 2010; Sergi, 2012). Context dependency is also recognized in some traditional project management studies (Söderlund, 2011), but the concept of situatedness takes the understanding of the existing environment and unique project to the level of understanding an individual moment. A moment—that is, a situation in which a project manager takes an action—may contain not only the implemented task but also the project manager's earlier experiences and other history, such as his or her family situation (Blomquist et al., 2010), farsightedness (Sanderson, 2012), or confidence in his or her managerial skills (Rolfe, Segal, & Cicmil, 2017). This study of moments is also referred to as the study of lived experience (Rolfe et al., 2017; Sergi, 2012; Cicmil, 2006; van der Hoorn, 2015).

When compared with traditional project management studies, the project-as-practice approach prefers studying project reality to evaluating project plans: ‘Being able to understand how real people solve real problems is, consequently, of paramount interest, whereas to evaluate or research how well project plans are implemented is of less significance’ (Blomquist et al., 2010, p. 13). For example, the project-as-practice approach embraces governing during the project instead of planning governance in advance (Sanderson, 2012). This focus on practices is adopted from the strategy-as-practice (S-as-P) approach. (Whittington, 2006). As a response, several authors have proposed that there is a need to pay better attention to the processual nature of projects

While projects have traditionally been considered to advance in finite steps that follow a pre-fixed order, process ontology explores projects as an evolving, living, and emerging dynamic and complex phenomenon (Blomquist et al., 2017; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Sergi, Crevani, & Aubry, 2016). In process studies, the change, becoming, and fluidity of events are included into the description of reality as this is considered to provide a more accurate image of projects in real life than conveying these as stable and unchangeable entities. The problem in project management has been that “the traditional project management tools are probably inappropriate for managing the project’ because these tools do not sufficiently support capturing nonlinearity, disruptions and delays” (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 684). Process studies argue that we need to know more about the manifold mundane activities, events, and interactions that take place during the project.

For example, when discussing how values, signs, symbols, and storytelling play significant roles in sensemaking during a project, Stingl and Geraldi (2017) characterize the project actors as “surfing on the waves of meaning in a highly ambiguous world” (p. 125). As this kind of ambiguity and *surfing* are essentially part of the project reality, these need to be accounted for, both in theory and practice. For instance, a serendipitous encounter between the project manager and the client may lead to a discussion that reveals a client’s unrecognized need. That there is disparity between plans and reality is something

that the client is only able to realize and articulate once he or she finds him or herself physically standing in the newly erected, half-built office structure and sensing the dimensions. This is what process ontology can account for.

Play Ontology

Process ontologies underscore the need to rethink how time is approached. Following Whitehead's process ontology definition, one can say that people do not experience time as such but rather a flow of events; in other words, the project events, practices, and activities order and construct time, not vice versa (cf. Hernes, 2017, p. 2). While construction projects are defined to take place within a bounded time and place—the physical where, what, and when are well-defined—the actual unfolding of the project is a much more nuanced, detailed, and complex affair. This creates tension between definition and practice. In the traditional view, a project is not what is actually accomplished (done) but what has been defined as belonging to the project in advance. In practice, however, instead of clearly defined time and space boundaries, a project often extends beyond the official time and space limits (deadlines are not met, deliveries are delayed, and spatial requirements are underestimated).

Helin et al. (2014, p. 1) state that “process is how process does,” meaning that what is performed in the process is what defines a process. While acknowledging the same *doing* character of projects, we would like to draw attention to specifics regarding how a project unfolds. For this purpose, we will introduce Hans-George Gadamer's hermeneutically oriented play ontology.

The way philosophical hermeneutics sees it, reality does not come in pre-given bits and pieces, and it is not defined through a subject–object distinction (Gadamer, 2004). Instead, to account for the ever-changing nature of reality and our relation to it, Gadamer introduces play ontology. Examples of play ontology are the play of fire, waves, and light, all of which consist of constant back-and-forth movement. Their very existence relies on the movement—should the movement stop the phenomenon vanishes as

well. Contemporary process philosophers, such as Rescher (1996), describe this movement using similar terms: “The river is not an object but an ever-changing flow; the sun is not a thing, but a flaming fire. Everything in nature is a matter of process, of activity, of change” (p. 10).

From this definition, it is clear that, for Gadamer, play is not equal to a game or even to a player. Rather, play has primacy “over the consciousness of the player” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 105). Play is not defined by the subject—a player—because Gadamer reverses the relation between the game and the player. It is not the player or his or her subjective ideas that the concept focuses on; rather, it underscores how he or she is played by the events and contexts, by the *play*. As Gadamer writes (2004, p. 106), “all playing is being-played.” In a project context, this can be interpreted that anybody involved in a project participates in a *play* that is played by the rules that were set much before this particular project saw its birth. We will call this, in a hermeneutic fashion, a pre-understanding about projects.

Play in Construction Projects

In terms of play ontology, a concrete activity or project phase derives its meaning from the project context and becomes understandable through the project play. When seen in detail, an activity consists of movement, of various doings and practices. For instance, a planning activity is not an object but consists of various activities such as thinking, drawing, calculations, meetings, and so forth. The architectural planning took several weeks, and the drafts were sent back and forth between the architect and the project management team, and the participants discussed and re-modeled the plans in several phases. The totality of these activities that belong to *planning* could not be defined in advance. Thus planning, instead of being defined as an abstract or objective project phase, is rather a composition of various kinds of activities, interactions, practices, and discourses that form what we (*pre* and *post factum*) term *planning*. The project play shows itself in that it is exactly these activities that count as the project,

and others are excluded. The project participants are being played by the cultural concept of planning—even their understanding of planning is a cultural construct.

What does play ontology mean for project research? We see that it provides two benefits for understanding how projects unfold. First, play ontology offers a conceptual tool for grasping various project issues as a continuum in time. For instance, in our case of a construction project, the thinking about interior design or room layouts changed during the project, particularly once the client viewed the unfinished construction. It is typical that issues related to interior design, such as furniture layout, are constructed in various stages of the project, and the issues mature over time. It may be that the client only later senses the proportions of the rooms, doors, and windows and then decides that some design aspect needs to be reconsidered. Play ontology makes it possible to consider the various stages of collective decision making—the constant back and forth—not as a disturbance but as natural to the process: the play—the becoming—is part of the issue's *being*, of its character. The layout is not something that becomes and remains a single entity; rather, it is often subject to various changes. Typically, architectural decisions or constraints influence organizational structure, and, vice versa, organizational changes have an influence on space as well (Ropo, Salovaara, Sauer, & De Paoli, 2015; Salovaara & Ropo, 2018). In other words, not all the spatial details need to be decided in advance but can actually remain in a state of becoming for quite a long time. The end users may develop an attitude of ownership with regard to space and feel entitled to change it later, too. Consequently, space would never be finished in the traditional sense.

The second benefit is that repetition is not seen as failure but belonging to the thing itself, to the characteristics of its *becoming*. Many issues in projects are not solved immediately—they become the subject of re-considerations, planning, and attempted revisions, and some issues are repeated. This was particularly evident in our case, which involved participants as co-creators of a new office space.

Repetitions were related to the fact that the participants were not experts in office design, and they were not accustomed to anticipating the impact of their decisions on other design aspects.

While re-considerations happen in any project, the implications of such back-and-forth movement for research have not yet been laid out in theoretical terms. We found that play ontology is an additional tool for describing issues that *become* in several attempts during a project. Play ontology further specifies how some phenomena and events during a project are constituted of interconnected but previously unspecified, unplanned, and serendipitous microactivities. In addition to the practice or process ontology perspectives, play ontology distinguishes between routines, microactivities, and repetitive patterns. This distinction helps to further refine the elements of project research.

The Case and Method

Our case materials are drawn from an office renovation project undertaken at the University of Tampere, Faculty of Management, Finland. The owner, University Properties of Finland Ltd (UPF), had initiated a pilot program to develop new types of learning and working environments in universities. Our team made a proposal that was accepted by the UPF board. The aim of the project was to renew the office environment (approximately 550 square meters) to meet the current needs of academic work by engaging the users of the space to co-design the project. UPF set a strict \$165'0000 (value added tax [VAT] excluded) budget for the project, including project management, design, and construction. The university was to cover the costs for new furniture, facility management services, and some research work. A project management team (PMT) was established to run the project and to ensure that the chosen modifications would bring the most value to the users and alignment (van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2017). The co-authors of this article served in different roles on the team. One acted as the project manager, another was the main facilitator of dialogues among the users in the workshops, and the third had her office in the space and provided information based on ethnographic observations, informal conversations, and accounts of

self-organized re-design activities during the project. All three served as a linking pin between the users and the architect (Figure 1). The architect's role in this project differed considerably (as shown in the vignettes) from typical space renovation projects in that the architect played a central role in designing the layouts early in the project, and the users had an opportunity to provide feedback on them. Having this kind of a facilitating organization enabled the architect to concentrate on creating smart architectural solutions based on a vast amount of information on the needs and desires of the users. This required significant effort from the project management team to analyze the materials concerning user interactions and the appropriateness of the designs. It was believed that the quality of the design would benefit from an analytical dialogue including both the users' and the architect's design perceptions. Keeping this dialogue alive was considered to be one of the main tasks of the project management team.

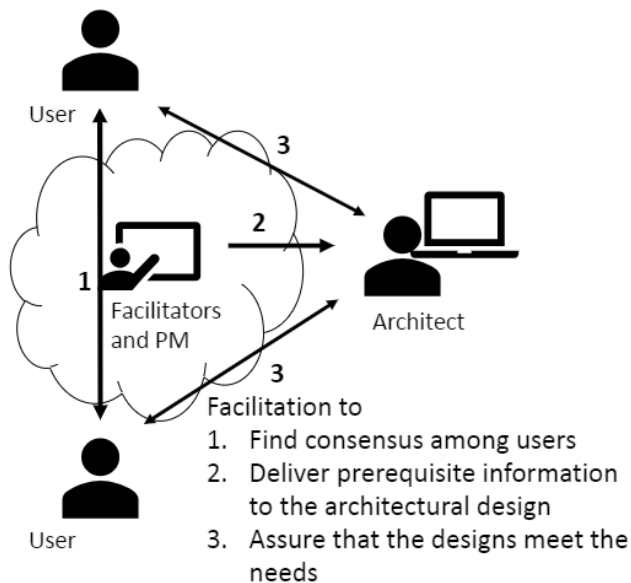


Figure 1. Facilitated dialogues in the project.

For this study we applied several qualitative research strategies, as these are the best-suited for gathering field materials in project-as-practice and process studies. The empirical materials were collected during the planning, execution, and follow-up phases between January 2016 (start of the

planning phase) and January 2017 (technical end of the project). The materials consist of interviews with the users of the space (before and after the project), six video-taped workshops, memos of six theme group meetings, notes on the premises' commissioning meeting (the phase where the space was formally handed over to the end-users), architectural and layout documents, photographs, and a survey.

Data collection and analysis applied organizational ethnography methods (Orr, 1995) and a hermeneutic approach to materiality that allows accounting for “non-linearity, uncertainty and ambiguity of the research process” (Salovaara, 2018, p. 315). The method and the analyses were developed step by step and had elements of an interactive, flexible research design, including all the research phases but not following a specific order (Maxwell, 2013). The theoretical framework, objectives, and questions of the study became more focused throughout the process. The first concern was to collect materials that were as rich as possible throughout the project. We did this by video-taping workshops, conducting interviews, participating in events, and observing end-users' activities in the space before, during, and after the project. With these materials, we followed Yanow (2010) in *giving voice* to academic practices. As the continuous re-configurations were a norm, not an exception, the research process was intentionally designed to accommodate surprises, changes, and discoveries. (Salovaara, 2018)

From the various materials, we constructed two types of process narratives from a practice perspective (Abdallah, Lusiani, & Langley, 2018; Langley et al., 2013; Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014; Sage, Dainty, & Brookes, 2012). The first round of the analysis describes the chronology of the project (Riessman, 2008). It represents the playful practices of the project in three vignettes, relying on the key phases of the project. Following Riessman's definition, these narratives are structured around the events, displaying the events in a chronological order, and including causal links. We consider the vignettes as windows into the project practices. The first vignette describes how the users play with different ideas, desires, and needs by building miniature models of the imagined office space. The second vignette introduces the architect's play, with various renderings based on the user information. The third vignette describes the

phase when the users moved into the new spaces after the construction and their play with furniture and artefacts as well as their current views and desires concerning the space.

The second round of the analysis looks inside those chronologically presented windows. There we take a closer look at what occurs inside the project. We describe the microactivities as they play out differently in three particular features of the project. In ‘Nests’, the playful microactivities of discussions and concrete actions take turns intensively throughout the project. In ‘Engaging students’, the play starts with marginal intensity, but grows considerably toward the end of the project, eventually finding its solution. In ‘Exercising and moving’, the play of ideas is intense in the beginning but gradually fades away.

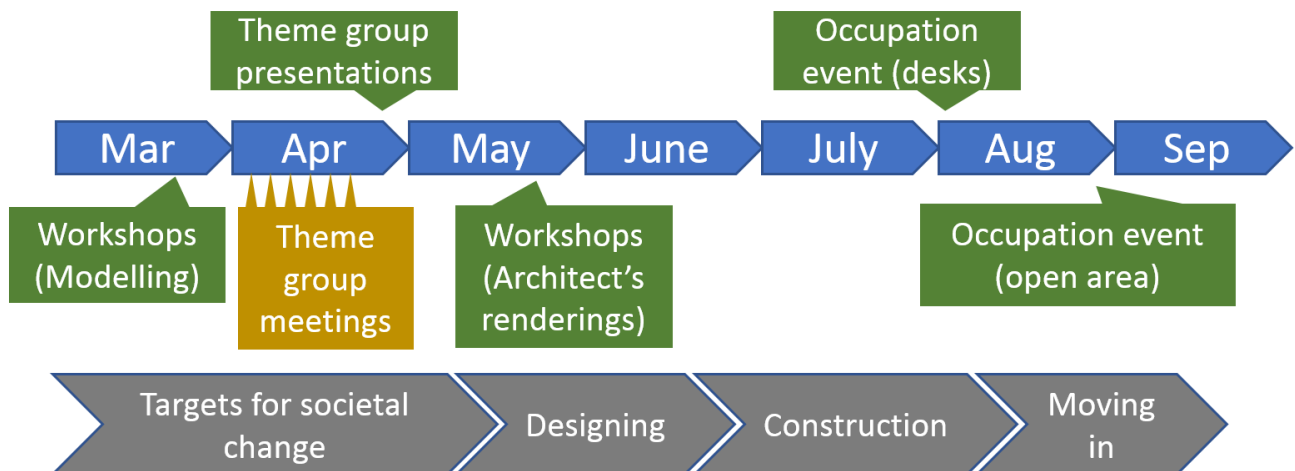


Figure 2. Timeline of the project.

First Round of Analysis: Unfolding the Project as Chronological Practices

The following account is a reconstructed narrative of the renovation project (see Figure 2). The following three phases of playful processes during the project are intended to highlight the emergent processes during the project. As mentioned earlier, we rely on Gadamer's (2004) play ontology, according to which the existence of the phenomenon—in this case the renovation project—is

conceptualized in terms of an unfolding process: the final outcome (e.g., space layout, room design, and colors) occurs through *playfulness*, a back-and-forth movement. In other words, we aim to illustrate the case through the flow of events that contributed to the final design (although there was no pre-set final design in a traditional sense, and changes to the room layouts were introduced after the formal interior design process was finished).

We illustrate the playfulness of the project practices through the following three narrative vignettes:

1. Modeling the space (tentative play)
2. Architect's renderings (architectural play)
3. Moving in to the renovated space (experiential play)

Vignette 1: Modeling the Space (Tentative Play)

The project began with interviews with the end users ($n = 24$), and a summary of the interviews was presented in two workshops in March and April 2016. The workshop agenda consisted of three items: the interview summary, a discussion of office design benchmarks from around the world, and the creation of mock models of the future workspace. Although the initial user desires were quite modest (“do something with the coffee room” or “it would be nice to have some bright colors here”), during the workshops the voices grew more hopeful and ambitious. One participant asked: “Could something really happen or is this only wishful thinking?” In terms of generating ideas, the examples from other office environments opened up the eyes of end users to new possibilities and uses of office space. Formally, however, nothing was decided at this point—only explored and tentatively experimented with.

Tossing around ideas and dreams about where and how one could work was accompanied by building mock versions; that is, miniature models of new spaces using Play-Doh, Legos, wooden blocks, Styrofoam™, and paper (Figure 3). Several ideas emerged, including a big communal table, open work

areas, a stretching and exercising corner, and reading and quiet study spaces. Although the outcomes of the project were still open and uncharted, the new vocabulary indicated that the imagined world of the participants was changing from the current work in office cubicles. The miniature models that were displayed openly for a few months kept the discussion process alive. The initial workshop ideas were further developed into theme groups, where some ideas were given priority and others were set aside. The ideas were probed and prioritized with Post-it® notes and discussions that lasted for several months.



Figure 3. Miniature model of the future office space. (Photograph, Jonni Roos)

The modeling phase became a platform of play, where all the ideas, dreams, and needs were projected into physical realities through the materials at hand, and these were played around with, tested, and retested. No one knew what kind of end result would be the best one. Risks were taken by tentatively tearing down walls in the miniature models, and spaces for new activities were imagined and built.

During the play period, possibilities of the unknown and unexpected outcomes took primacy over the current state. The participants were immersed in the imaginary spaces. Hence, the modeling phase was about playing out different possibilities, ideas, and desires.

Vignette 2: Architect's Sketches (Architectural Play)

Architects' sketches are typically drawn according to the clients' specifications; the client describes his or her needs, and then he or she receives the first draft, sends feedback, gets the second draft, and so forth. The iteration usually takes several rounds. In our case, the clients were the end users who, initially, did not know what they collectively wanted. There were vague desires for some modest alterations, adding more colors and other similar improvements. However, as the project started, a handful of people were eager and willing to see what the project might become. The architect was invited to join the workshops as a silent partner. He did not participate in the discussions but kept inspecting the wall constructions and studying the current layouts and technical structures of the materials. He was not asked to draw a layout for several months. Finally, in late May (several months after the beginning of the project), he drew several scenarios in one week, which included all the three main functions that the end users had come up with while prioritizing their desires in the theme groups: a quiet workspace, a communal lounge, and private meeting spaces. The architect presented the first four scenarios to the end users. All agreed that none of the four scenarios would be the final solution. However, they introduced a common language for talking about the space, its possibilities, and challenges. Scenarios were tossed back and forth between the architect and the end users. Modifications were suggested, and new models were presented without a clear picture of what the end result would be. Both the architect and the participants were engaged in the architectural co-design process, accepting that at this stage none of them knew exactly what the outcome would be—the project proceeded here as an open-ended discussion, with the mutual acknowledgment that a definite final design needed to be approved by all the parties involved.

In this interactive and iterative process, the architect had more of a communicative role than sole responsibility for the final layout, which was reflected in the several designs he offered during the process. The phases and sketches helped the iterative process and enabled the participants to develop their own understanding. The architect's skills and experience were used as a heuristic tool that enabled the participants to communicate with each other, the architect, and the construction company about the new vision and how it would be reflected in the details. The back-and-forth movement between the sketches, the participants' ideas, and the architect proved to be vital to the process, because none of the end users had experience in professional space design. The time spent in conceptual planning, approximately five months, was exceptionally long compared to other renovation projects that were performed in the university setting. However, it was necessary for this participatory *playful* co-design, which required time and space for creating and sharing ideas, negotiating priorities, and arriving at temporary outcomes.

Vignette 3: Moving in to the Renovated Spaces (Experiential Play)

Moving day in August 2016—after summer vacation, when a number of participants gathered to see the new spaces—was anticlimatic. Hopes were high when people entered the newly renovated and opened spaces, but the appearance was bleak. The communal space lacked furniture, and the two new open workspace areas were full of furniture (high cabinets), most of which looked inappropriate or unnecessary. High cabinets scattered throughout the space blocked the light and visibility, making the open workspaces dark and compartmental. The participants immediately concluded that it was not at all what they had wanted. They found the new open office space distressing and isolating. The risk had been realized: they had not been able to communicate their ideas to the architect in the right way.

This reluctance did not last long however. Within half an hour people started re-arranging the furniture, moving it back and forth and trying out different layouts. In that moment, they were caught up

in enthusiasm, energy, and playful experimentation, much as they had been during the modeling phase; now, however, they had tangible furniture and materials to focus on. Some furniture was replaced, just to see how it felt, and the space was continually reshaped as they experimented with different layouts.

We later concluded that the disappointment with the architect's solution was based on a misunderstanding between the architect and the space users. The architect attempted to satisfy their needs, which they had expressed vaguely—for example, by saying “yes, I can work in the open space, but I need some privacy too, like working in a *nest* surrounded by my colleagues.” To respond to this, the architect divided the space with large cabinets. Everybody's perception of the end result probably differed, but this became clear only during the physical move-in stage, once the furniture had been arranged.

During the first three months of the official move in, the new space was in a constant state of *becoming*. There was an open-ended, emerging outcome as people kept looking around and asking: “what if?” Sofas, tables, and chairs were relocated several times, and the spaces were accessorized with pillows, throws, and candles (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Quiet corner for small meetings and reading in the new open office space. (Photograph, Jonne Renvall)

The space arrangements continued to evolve for the next approximately six months. Some of these changes are seasonal; for example, during Christmas (in fact, throughout the dark season of the Finnish winter), an artificial tree lightens the spaces, followed by seasonal decorations around Easter and the first of May. This highlights the emergence of the process. Unintentionally, the (rather irritating) phase of settling in and re-arranging furniture contributed to the users' commitment to the space. The project management team interpreted that the realization that they could move things around increased their feeling of ownership.

The Second Round of Analysis: Emerging Play of Microactivities

The vignettes discussed earlier depict the renovation project phases unfolding over time. Next, we will elaborate in more detail on how some key features of the process emerged as a play of microactivities: *First* was how the end-users came up with the term *nest* to illustrate the physical and emotional spaces they wanted to work in and how the term manifested itself in the architect's layout and was felt by the end users while moving in. *Second* entailed engaging students in the project and seeing them as part of the spatial practices developed as a marginal discourse—on the sidelines of the whole project—yet the collective agreement in favor of inclusion was an easy, clear-cut decision. *Third*, space for exercising and stretching was a central topic in the project's microactivities in the beginning of the project, but it gradually faded away. The play among microactivities in these instances, thus, had different intensities over the course of the process.

Developing the Metaphor of Nests

In the initial interviews, only a few end users expressed willingness to give up their individual offices and move to a more open, communal workspace. Although examples of such workplaces were provided in the first workshop, none was from an academic work context. Thus, the idea of how an open space might work in a university was difficult for the users to imagine. However, such an understanding was eventually developed.

In the first workshop, described in the vignette above, the participants worked in teams and built miniature models to illustrate how the old office corridor-dominated space could be changed to provide more of a community feeling and space for casual encounters. The need for quiet, individual workspaces was emphasized in the models, but it was also realized that some people would actually have to work in an open space if walls were to be torn down to create a more communal space. The modeling workshop appeared to be a transitional phase during which the participants began to think

about the possibility of working in an open office, although there was still opposition to this idea. For example, one participant stated: “I suggested an open space, but it was not accepted.” In another group, the open space was meant for “those who work part time or do (a lot of) remote work...’ Some had doubts about the potentially marginal use of a common open space and referred to the limited use of the current coffee room.

To address the tension between the need for quiet individual spaces in an open office and the desire for an open communal space, the participants developed the metaphor of a nest. The open office workstations should enable the feeling of privacy, quietness, and safety surrounded by ample furniture to prevent movement behind one’s back.

In the draft design assessment workshop, there was a generally positive attitude toward working in nests. The elaboration of the nest concept focused on the concrete practices: The users wanted a dedicated desk policy to ensure that those who were seldom present knew where they could sit as well as the number of shelves and cabinets in the open office space. After these requirements had been met, most of the comments were positive, such as: “I’m ready for it” or “I’m open to all suggestions.” However, some people remained doubtful. The main source of scepticism was the code of conduct in the open office—for example, whether even saying “Hi!” might bother other people. One participant doubted whether the change would be good for her personally, saying: “I’m very satisfied with my work, and I can’t see how a different (office) space would bring any benefit.” To continue the development in a positive atmosphere, it was agreed that no one would be forced to move to the open office, and a survey was conducted to find volunteers. The result of the survey after the workshop was quite surprising: half of the people ($f = 12$, $n = 24$) were willing to move to an open office.

A week after this session, the architect’s detailed designs were presented, with the goal of beginning a dialogue on a suitable furniture layout; however, because the users did not have any further

comments, the project management team saw little reason to continue additional designing. It was decided that the furniture would be adjusted afterward based on the users' needs and reactions.

Engaging Students

The students' engagement in the project and their inclusion in the space were initially only marginally considered. At the time of the planning, the student lounge was in the hallway, which was separated by a door from the staff's area, and the students only had access to the corridors of the actual department. In one early suggestion, the students were offered a short corridor where they could hang out and wait for a meeting with a teacher. According to the person who presented the model, this lounge would be separated from the staff area by a door that would require a key. The students were not mentioned at all in two of the four models presented by the participants.

Engaging students was not among the focal topics in the theme groups when the topics were prioritized. In the theme group presentations, someone in the group asked: "Where are the students?" This question triggered a lively discussion, and it was agreed that engaging students was one of the best opportunities in developing the space. Indeed, bringing students into the discussions with the researchers was found to enhance the collaborative and community atmosphere that was desired from the beginning.

In all versions of the draft designs, the student lounge was left in the hallway, which was still separated by a door from the staff's new *coffice*, a combination of a coffee bar and office (Figure 5, before). A student representative pointed out that trying to find teachers in an open office might disturb other people working there and suggested that it would be convenient to have a space where both the teachers and the students could chat and meet informally. In a discussion, one participant observed: "There is lots of space, nearly half of it dedicated to just hanging around," meaning that a *coffice* would provide space for these encounters. In this meeting it was agreed that students should be allowed to use the space as well.

This decision was depicted in the next version of the layout. As a result, the student lounge and the *coffee* were combined, and the door between them was removed (Figure 5, after). This suggestion was approved by the staff members, who requested that a door be placed between the *coffee* and the open office area instead to block potential noise.

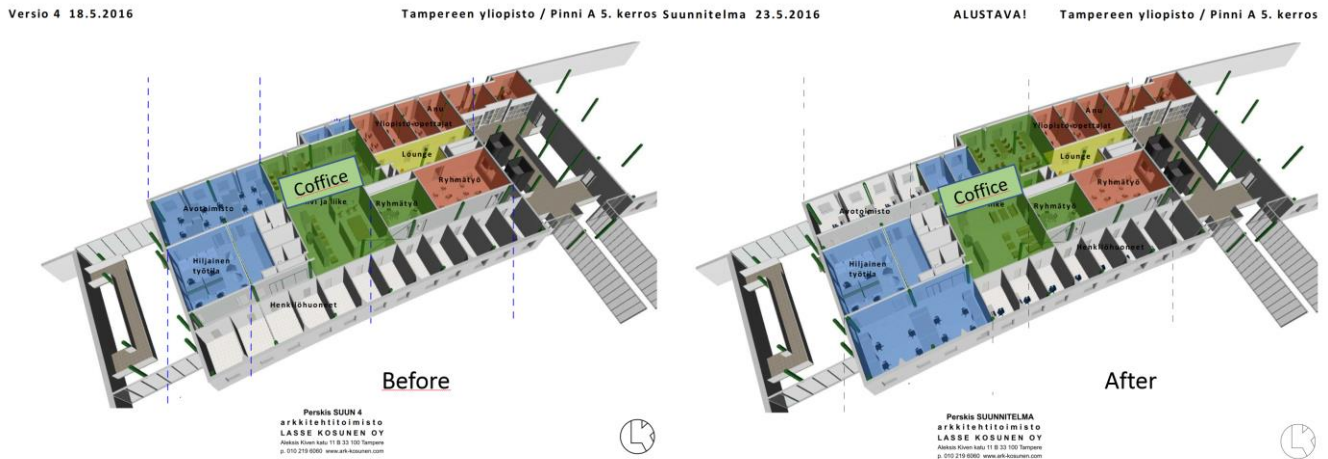


Figure 5. Layout suggestions before and after the assessment workshop.

Fading Away of Exercise Space

In the modeling workshops, a space for exercise and movement was one of the most frequently mentioned topics, and considerable attention was vested in it. In half of the models, a separate space was included for stretching and exercising. In one model, wall bars for hanging and stretching were added. Consequently, space for exercising and moving was selected as a topic worth elaborating on. The ethos was that moving more and sitting less would increase well-being and provide an opportunity for serendipitous encounters.

After the modeling workshops, the enthusiasm for a stretching and exercising space was still strong in the beginning of the theme group work. However, after elaborating and sorting out the most wanted things in the space renewal, the actual working conditions took over. Only one theme group still

maintained the exercising and moving idea. One user voiced the common concern: “I don't think that our community is ready for common exercise sessions.”

Gradually, hesitation grew about including a dedicated space for exercise. It was suggested that any common area could be used for stretching. The conversation over the exercise space gradually stopped. Exercise was viewed as something that could occur in the *coffice* area. After moving in, a survey questionnaire was sent to the end users to ensure that all the requested features had been delivered. Someone mentioned stretching wall bars, which were subsequently installed (Figure 6), and served as a symbolic reminder that stretching and moving are allowed and encouraged.



Figure 6. Stretching wall bars as part of an activity-based office.

Discussion

This study contributes to project-as-practice studies by extending its theory to cover processual approaches to projects. Our research focused on re-thinking ontological aspects of a construction project undertaken in a university setting. The two rounds of analysis discussed earlier show how the office space was collectively designed in the process among the end users, architect, and project management team. This approach has similarities with *alignment seeking*, where the project management role is to reconcile different views between stakeholders and mobilize action (van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2017). The first round of analysis (vignettes) presents three chronologically ordered project phases that the authors retrospectively chose for illustrating how the process actively involved the end users. The second round of analysis describes the microactivities that continued through several project phases.

The end user engagement forced the project management team to have a more flexible approach to the project. For instance, the back-and-forth discussion on whether students should be able to use the space may, in traditional project management terms, seem like indecisiveness about the project goals and purposes. As Blomquist et al. (2017) state, structured, mechanistic forecasting is typical in the traditional systems-based project management approach. The end user indecisiveness prevents the project management team from making decisions about the design, materials, and space layout, thus, in traditional terms, slowing down the project. In this respect, the goal of the traditional project management approach is to finalize or *kill* the issue as soon as possible. Here, however, the inclusive planning kept the issues alive for a longer period, and the project structure had to be more flexible during the course of the project.

Whereas the continuously emerging microactivities are a nuisance from the traditional project management perspective, from the end users' perspective they represent an organic accumulation of knowledge. In the theoretical framework discussed earlier, we called the back-and-forth considerations

vibrant movements. They indicate that an issue, when not *killed*, is alive and evolving as a social construct. In terms of play ontology, this evolvment is not an exception or anomaly but an elementary ontological characteristic: the topic is furthered, and thus its ontology is, by nature, processual. As evidenced in the vignettes, the microactivities around the three chosen topics (nests, student engagement, and exercise equipment) carry over into several project stages.

The example of *nests* in the open office reveals that the end user considerations do not focus on the new physical, material office space but rather reflect the future premises and the change in work culture. However, the discussion does not move from abstract ideas toward concrete suggestions and design instructions, although this might be the preferred procedure used by traditional project managers. The direction of the discussion appears to develop from suggestions of new practices toward more detailed agreements concerning the new code of conduct. For example, the idea of having students around was first introduced in the form of the question: “Where are the students?” Later, the student representatives suggested that students should be allowed to co-exist and have their breaks with the staff in the coffee lounge. Socially, this was a huge change compared to the old break room, which even some of the staff hesitated to use because it had been privatized by a small group of people. However, from the project management team’s perspective, this discussion did not offer more detailed information in a technical or design sense, although the social change required technical modification (changing the position of a door). The fact that the issue was left open allowed the end users to digest the new suggestion.

When this observation is inspected through the lens of *destabilizing stability* (Langley, 2007), it provides understanding regarding the problems of project changes. If the project team or designers push the client to provide more detailed input information for the design, from their perspective, the client’s inability to decide is stable. However, the end users’ (who, after all, in this participative model, need to approve the design) attitudes and images have advanced. The way in which the input for the design

process emerged follows Langley et al.'s (2013) process conceptualization in which the contradictions and tensions spur the change, and interactions among people may take on unexpected forms.

The logic of Gadamerian play ontology makes it possible to explain in theoretical terms how the decisions about the new office space emerged during the project through back-and-forth movement. An activity-based office concept, for instance, was not originally even considered as a possibility, and the original layout did not allow for it. It was only during the workshops and meetings that the end users developed an understanding of what would be possible and what not (as indicated, in the preceding interviews, even a wall color other than white was considered a major improvement).

According to Rolfe et al. (2017), a significant part of a project managers' work is managing his or her own stress and anxiety. We suggest that recognizing how clients' self-understanding develops during the project has considerable practical implications for the project managers: understanding the continuous, repetitive nature of end user discussions may provide the project managers with a more varied view of decision making, which may reduce their anxiety and help them succeed.

According to play ontology, a phenomenon exists if there is observable back-and-forth movement, and our contribution is to provide illustrations of how this occurs in practice. Using play ontology, we identified three moments that add to project management theorizing on decision making in projects. First, there is silent acceptance. This occurred in the case of *student engagement*. Here, the playful movement had begun with informal discussions—some individual comments on opening the space for people beyond the staff (weak signals)—and these topics reappeared and strengthened during the process without notable objections. The ontological status of this vibrant movement became apparent when someone posed the question: “Where are the students?” and then concrete suggestions followed.

The second moment is abandoning an idea, which occurred with space for exercising and moving. This idea was greeted enthusiastically in the first workshop, and it was discussed as a good idea for several months. However, in the end, the end-users decided that such a space would be redundant. Thus,

the idea was essentially abandoned, although a pair of stretching wall bars were added afterward. (Note: As one of us was hanging from the bars about a year after the renovation, a passerby commented that this was the first time she had ever seen someone using the bars.)

The third moment is the inability to develop further without additional information, which occurred with the *nests* example. This was evidenced when the end-users could not provide more precise comments on the final furniture plan for the open office layout. Once the furniture had arrived and needed to be rearranged, it became clear that neither the end users nor the architect had been able to mentally figure out how the space would look and feel. It is possible that even 3D modeling may not have helped, although it may have shown the height of the closets in the middle of the room more clearly. Here, play ontology is a useful concept for describing the flow of events. That the back-and-forth movement with regard to workspaces was not yet finished was only realized after the furniture had arrived.

Facilitating Play: Practical Implications

A project is traditionally seen as a managed entity with specific time limits, objectives, and a budget. These perimeters applied to the studied case too; there was a timeline and a set budget. However, defining the objectives was in this case left up to the space users, as the above set of microactivities (nests, engaging students, and space for exercise) highlight: these solutions were developed while the project was already ongoing. As the authors and members of the project management team, we have distilled our key learnings into the following three aspects:

1. Timetable

Once the interviews had been conducted and it became clear that there was a real need to restructure the office, the timetable was set with the university. The project team realized that the physical renovation work had to take place during the summer vacation between late June and mid-August. This set clear parameters or perimeters: any *play* would have to take place within that timeframe. As the renovation

work was estimated to take around two months and needed to be finished by 15 August 2016, the start would be mid-June. Two additional deadlines could be drawn from this: as the construction materials needed to be ordered about three to four weeks before that, the participatory planning needed to be accomplished by mid-May.

Unlike in traditional construction projects, we deliberately dedicated five months for the participatory planning process. Here the project management team role was essential in communicating, involving people, and coordinating the activities between the end users, the administration, and the construction company.

2. Project management team facilitating end user engagement and dialogue

The project management team is responsible for managing the relationship between the project organization, the contractor, and the client. In this case the project management team's role was extended to facilitate the relationship between the end users and the project organization too. Managing these two relationships (the traditional and extended roles) requires a very different mindset. In traditional project management, the project manager can assess certain clear time expectations, where, for example, a carpenter uses two days to build a new dividing wall. The outcome and resources needed are basically predictable. There is not much surprise in this play.

Managing end users' engagement is of a different nature. The project management team cannot reliably know how far project planning will advance or what the outcome will be. In a workshop, the end users may or may not agree on the final specifications for the space. In the interim, the voluntary theme groups may or may not meet and produce more or less accomplished further sketches. The end users are also prone to quitting or stop working on the project because they have their own *real* work to do. The end users walk their paths, and the project management team's role is to sense where they go and how far they have gone. They know what the goal is—a new space—but their understanding of when they are done with planning differs from that of the project management team. For the project management team

no objective knowledge exists that indicates when the end users are *ready*. In contrast to traditional project management, this means observations, facilitation, enabling, and coaching—not control.

The managerial toolbox to be used here distinguishes itself from the traditional project management approach mainly because the end users are not formally part of the project organization. To work with construction workers is to work with professionals, whereas the end users are basically laypeople in the project and, typically, only minimally involved. Yet here participation and whatever is accomplished depend on creating a sensible dialogical relationship between the end users themselves and between the end users and the project management team.

3. Ethnographic toolbox

To create a sense of how people were reacting to the change and to tap into the ongoing conversations, the project management team needed to observe the culture and end users' interactions. This includes gaining a sense of their language usage, communication patterns, and behavior (avoidance of issues or people, engagement, motivations, etc.). These features contributed to the project management *culture of knowledge production* during the project. In an ethnographic fashion, the project management team needs to discover the rules for the play that is being played. This procedure reminds us of the anthropological approach, where anthropologists make sense of the event in which the participants are taking part, such as Clifford Geertz (1973) did in his analysis on Balinese cockfighting. The project manager's task is to extract patterns and behaviors that would reveal *deep play*, as Geertz (1973) called it, and to re-create the playing rules. Geertz (1973, p. 86) claims that "societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them." The ethnographic task is to read the culture on its own terms and to enable its play to take place within the context of the project—if the project management team wants to create a participative process.

Conclusions

Our case study shows that, from the project management perspective, there are issues that remain unresolved for a long time, even when these should—in the traditional sense of project management—be resolved much earlier. In terms of play ontology, this is not a failure nor disruption but belongs to the nature of a project that relies heavily on end user input. Even repetitive conversations about the issues at stake serve the purpose of helping the end users to digest their reasoning and real needs. In this case, the back-and-forth movement is not a phase (because no external authority can tell when the movement stops), but describes emerging and becoming of the issue (as opposed to being ontology,; Chia, 1997). In our project, this was evidenced, for instance, when the end users, after the furniture had been physically set down, kept on remodelling the space for several months. Even after the official project had finished, the space did not come to a standstill.

This play ontology understanding of project ontology has concrete consequences for project management practice and research. In terms of research, one could ask several questions from a new angle: Where does the project end? Is the project that which we set to observe in advance or what takes place in practice? Who are the actors? What do we observe when we cannot predict where and in what kind of conversations and practices our research interest may emerge? These questions underscore that process research differs from the traditional project management perspective (Blomquist et al., 2017).

The researchers also need to embrace the richness of the empirical data in more creative ways. Is there something missing from our data? Do our research subjects talk about something *behind our back*, or is there a more widespread silence about some issues? Are there taboos, implicit or unnoticed patterns, or something that is unconsciously avoided? Is our research approach able to combine empirical observations from different stages in a longitudinal fashion? While these questions may look abstract, in our case the role of students in the faculty premises clearly showed that an issue might be almost too

close to be noticed: Although the students are an elementary part of the university, the space design, in various stages, almost managed to completely forget them. Once their inclusion was collectively agreed on, it had a profound impact on the interior layout.

Lastly, in practice, the project management team occupies an ambiguous role between various interests and groups. The project management team's own organization puts pressure on the project management team because, despite all the changes that occur, the project needs to remain on schedule and within budget. Some issues develop in a repetitive back-and-forth fashion, and this might be particularly frustrating and anxiety provoking for the project management team that wants to keep track of major decisions and project phases. This anxiety, as stated above, may hinder the project management team from listening to, interpreting, and waiting for—and being sensitive to—microactivities.

Another practical point to consider is that the information the project management team has at the start of the project is traditionally regarded as representing the knowledge of the parties involved; from the process ontology perspective, however, it is but a fleeting moment of clarity, whereby the project reality and events will soon form more vivid realities. But vibrant movements play an important role in decision-making during the project. The three moments of our case—nests, student engagement, and exercise equipment—represent essential project decisions, yet none of them had been anticipated at the beginning of the project; for example, these content issues were not included in the budget. This goes to show that a certain type of ontological playfulness might be essential for describing and understanding projects in practice.

The findings of this study contribute to the project-as-practice research and support van der Hoorn and Whitty's (2017) elaboration of how project management practices create alignment. This study confirms that alignment seeking is central in project management (O'Leary & Williams, 2013). We acknowledge that our study has its limitations. Whether it is always possible to plan a project through play ontology, is something we cannot determine from one case, and the question of how this approach

scales to larger projects with more actors and more complex structures cannot be answered in this article. Yet we note that, while participatory practices are more common today in both public and private sector construction projects, various stakeholders are increasingly involved in various stages of the project. We have highlighted the need for project management adaptability and sensitivity when undertaking a participatory process. The fundamental value of process ontology, especially when informed by a play ontology, lies in its ability to provide sense making tools with regard to unexpected turns and nonlinear nature of the participatory process.

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